Vladimir Maiakovskii, 1921. Photography by Aleksandr Rodchenko.

Base Superstructures and Technical Difficulties in Maiakovskii's America

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In the world only play, play as artists and children engage in it, exhibits coming-to-be and passing away, structuring and destroying, without any moral additive, in forever equal innocence.
—Nietzsche

This was no time for play.
This was no time for fun.
This was no time for games.
There was work to be done.
—Dr. Seuss

In Russian the phrase "discovery of America" is an idiomatic expression connoting irony. Usually uttered in response to an inane statement, it contains its ironic negation. "Well, you have just discovered America," although sounding like praise, is in fact a rebuke. It's precisely the inclusion of both America's metaphorical and literal meanings that makes this idiom so effectively trenchant. It suggests that the interlocutor has failed to surprise with his new discovery, but also maliciously points to a successful attempt at discovering something new, i.e., America. The title of Vladimir Maiakovskii's travelogue "My Discovery of America" sounds both self-aggrandizing and somewhat self-deprecating; the word "my" literalizes the metaphor and destabilizes its meaning. It is to the tension between the literal and the metaphorical that this paper is dedicated.

I won't be discovering America when I say that at the beginning of the last century European avant-gardists searched for the new amid the cubist landscapes of the American metropolis. Russian artists contributed to the cultivation of the image of America as a laboratory for testing desirable and undesirable futures. By the mid-twenties, when the eyes of the new Soviet state became firmly fixed on the future, the image of America as a futuristic ideal spread outside of the exclusive domain of avant-garde artists, infiltrating mass culture. The masses were flocking to Hollywood films in order to see their fantasies of success of an average man come to life on the screen. Ravaged postwar Russia was looking for ways to recover in the shortest time possible and found its inspiration in a country whose relative youth was not a hindrance to its prosperity and whose "American dream" promised a bright future as a reward for an arduous present. Survival became synonymous with industrialization and industrialization with Americanization; Lenin endorsed Fordism in the workplace and Taylorism as a way of life, while Trotsky defended the rhetoric of American efficiency, success through hard work, and self-sufficiency as a moral ideal.[1] While America was invading the public discourse on the future of Russia and American tractors were slowly penetrating the depth of the Russian countryside, Vladimir Maiakovskii went on a mission to conquer America.

A futurist-urbanist and a faithful servant of the new state, Vladimir Maiakovskii found himself at the crossroads of various discourses surrounding America as an aesthetic, moral, and technological ideal. Analyzing the trajectory of Maiakovskii's relationship to America, my paper aims to shed light on the points of divergence between the revolutionary poet's and the

1. See Jeffrey Brooks, "The Press and Its Message: Images of America in the 1920s and 1930s."

revolutionary state's visions of the future. This discord, which neither side welcomed, manifests itself in the incompatible conceptions and applications of the metaphor of technology.

Maiakovskii's trip to America in 1925 was not the beginning of his relationship with the country; it was, in fact, its culmination. The trip was to serve either as a final refutal or a final confirmation of the potency of his artistic vision: "Ne dlia togo ia poekhal v Ameriku, chtoby potom pisat' o nei, a potomu, chto ia ran'she pisal o nei."[2] The real America was to present conclusive evidence of his victory over the imaginary America of his poetry. The self-proclaimed "plenipotentiary of Soviet poetry"[3] had some rather personal reasons for this pilgrimage. Much of Maiakovskii's pre-trip poetry exploring the American terrain brings forth a narrative of epic proportions. Each poem tells of the poet's movement through the world, conquering everything on his way and finally reaching America, his most-desired destination. In "Ei!" Maiakovskii sails toward America in a steamship; in "Amazing Facts" Maiakovskii speeds toward America in a Flying Dutchman; in "The Flying Proletarian" Maiakovskii navigates toward America in an underwater aero, a prototype of a submarine; and in "150,000,000" Maiakovskii eschews any existing or mythical modes of transportation in favor of traveling toward America on foot.

This compulsion to repeat suggests some deep-rooted desire whose realization is all the more fulfilling the further it's postponed. Maiakovskii repeatedly calls "150,000,000" an *Iliad* of the revolution, and on a more explicit level this epic is a political tract on the battle between two economic systems. The poem attempts to propose an invasion of the prosperous United States as a solution to the postwar hunger problem. But a careful glance shows that this *Iliad* has its own Helen of Troy; America appears in this role of an "electro-dynamo-mechanical" Helen. Before relating the cosmic battle between the Russian Ivan, a collective image of hungry workers, and Woodrow Wilson, a collective image of satiated bourgeois, Maiakovskii describes the booty by cataloguing the beauties of Chicago: "Mir, iz sveta chastei sobiraia kvintet,/ odaril ee moshch'iu magicheskoi./ Gorod v nei stoit na odnom vinte,/ ves' elektro-dynamo-mekhanicheskii./ V Chikago 14,000 ulits—solnts ploshchadei luchi./ *Ot kazhdoi—700* pereulkov dlinnoiu poezdu na god."[4] The parenthetical interjections of the orgiastic quality of the American lifestyle that pop up throughout the recounting of the preparation for the battle can only be construed as reminders of its objective. In this perpetual orgy Chicago is made effeminate by the reference to its sensual plumpness and by the metonymic association with wives of millionaires and other mercenary females who clutch their lap-dogs in agitated anticipation.

One American critic expressed his bewilderment over Maiakovskii's choice of Chicago as the epitome of American desirability. After all, it is New York, and not Chicago, that is located on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean from which Ivan the *bogatyr'*[5] emerges as an extinct and exotic animal, but Maiakovskii's epic is not subject to verisimilitude but to the logic of poetics. The refrain "*Ch*udnó *ch*eloveku v *Ch*ikago! I *ch*údno!"[6] following each new ecstatic recital of Chicago's splendor makes an alliterative connection between the strangeness of Chicago and the marvel it brings to humanity.

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2. "I did not go to America so that I could write about her, but because I had written about her." Quoted in Pertsov, p. 7. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

3. Quoted in Hasty and Fusso, p. 161. Maiakovskii toured America not as a private tourist but as a public persona, a representative of the Soviet state; while in America, he gave a large number of lectures about the Soviet state and several interviews to various newspapers, including *The New York Times*.

4. "The earth, assembling a quintet from the parts of the world, endowed it [America] with magical powers. In it a city stands on a single screw, all electro-dynamo-mechanical. In Chicago there are 14,000 streets--rays of the sun-squares. 700 lanes, each as long as a train-ride lasting a year, branch out from every street." "150.000.000" p. 101.

5. A *bogatyr'* is a hero of Russian folk epics, known for his great strength. It's curious that in this particular poem Maiakovskii chooses to reach America via non-technological means; furthermore, Ivan succeeds in winning his battle with heavily-armed Wilson without any use of weapons, planes, or other technological aids. In fact, Ivan defeats Wilson with his bare hands. In this feat, poetry becomes a valuable substitute for the technology that Russians do not yet possess. As Russians cannot get to America by boat ("Russkikh v gorod tot ne vezet parokhod"), they get to visit America with the help of the high-speed boots of Maiakovskii's poetry ("nachiniaites' i vy chudesami--v skorokhodakh-stikhakh,/ v stikhakh-sapogakh/ iskhodite Ameriku sami"--Maiakovskii invites his readers). Ibid., p. 102. And who needs aeroplanes when in the midst of the battle poets could ascend to the sky of their own volition ("...togda poety vzleteli na nebo/ chtob sverkhu streliat', kak s aeroplana by.")? Ibid., p. 126.

6. "It's strange to be in Chicago! And marvelous!" Ibid., pp. 101-102.

Tsvetan Todorov defines the marvelous as the genre in which any hesitation between a natural and supernatural explanation of events has been eliminated. In the genre of the marvelous the supernatural takes over, and the boundary between mind and matter or fantasy and reality falls apart, as anything that mind can conceive of materializes.[7] It's the suspension of all limitations that makes Maiakovskii yearn for and create the marvelous. Inhabitants of Chicago exposed to the excess of potentialities released by technology grow if not in stature then in status ("V Chikago u kazhdogo zhitelia ne menee general'skogo chin").[8] This miracle deeply disconcerted the critics: everyone's promotion to the status of a general makes class struggle obsolete; and if no one needs to be saved from the decaying West, what is the purpose of this cosmic battle? The answer provided by Maiakovskii did not seem satisfactory: "v dikom razgrome/ staroe smyv/ novyi razgromim/ po miru mif/ vremia-ogradu vzlomim nogami/ tysiachu radug v nebe nagammim."[9] This attainment of freedom through the extension of spatial and temporal limits relegated the immediate goal of combating hunger to the background. Lenin called the work "flagrant stupidity and pretentiousness,"[10] possibly incensed by Maiakovskii's insistence on supplanting the old myth with a new one. Trotsky compared the poem to pacifying baby talk: "v nemotivirovanno primitivnykh obrazakh, nesmotria na gromykhaiushchii giperbolizm, slyshitsia dazhe prisiusiukivanie, to samoe, kakim inye vzroslye razgovarivaiut s det'mi."[11] This comparison taps into the nature of Maiakovskii's impermissible playfulness; like children's games, his epic battles are purposeless and far removed from the real. Maiakovskii's theatricality is a ground well-trodden by scholars. Yet here I propose that his playfulness is not a matter of theatrical behavior that relies on a mask, a stage, and an audience, but is a solitary activity performed with all the earnestness of child's play.

Sigmund Freud demonstrates how compulsion to repeat the same scenario characterizes child's play. By repeatedly acting out the situation that causes him anxiety, the child attempts to gain mastery over it.[12] The anxiety Maiakovskii experiences is existential and has little to do with the class struggle. The desire to magnify the scale of his life ("i chuvstvuiu-- 'ia' dlia menia malo")[13] propels him into his imaginary travels across the world. After his "futurism has taken Russia in its iron grip," it's time to expand its influence as far as the Americas. Maiakovskii's poem "Christopher Columbus" reveals this dynamic behind discoveries of America. The epigraph to the poem, written on the ship that was taking the poet to America, reads "Khristofor Kolumb byl Khristofor Kolomb—ispanskii evrei. (iz zhurnalov),"[14] pointing to the weakness Columbus was to compensate for by discovering the Indies. The poem hypothesizes a situation in which taunts about Columbus's Jewishness become the impetus for his expedition. The discovery of America is a response ("Chto vy lezete: Evropa da Evropa!/ Voz'mu i otkroiu druguiu stranu."[15]) to the provocation "Chto vy za natsiia? Odin Sion./ Liuboi portugalishka dast tebe foru!"[16] Maiakovskii empathizes with the Jewish adventurer/explorer who expands the horizons of the world in order to establish his own position within it. The editors of the complete collection of Maiakovskii's works published by the Soviet Academy of Sciences in 1958 felt it necessary to attach a footnote disproving Maiakovskii's statement about Columbus being a Spanish Jew, perhaps because the association of Maiakovskii with the Jewish Columbus exposes the poet's anxiety over his own frailty, which he tried to alleviate through perpetual conquests of American and other terrains.[17]

Franz Kafka's friends recollect that the writer was never in a more cheerful mood than when he was

7. Todorov, p. 114-15.

8. "In Chicago everyone has at least a general's rank." "150.000.000," p. 101.

9. "In wild destruction having washed away the old, we will thunder a new myth over the world. We'll kick through the fence of time and sound a thousand rainbow scales in the sky." Ibid., p. 98.

10. Lenin, vol. 52., p. 179.

11. "In the unjustifiably primitive images, despite the thunderous hyperbole, one detects even that same prattle that some adults use when talking to children." Quoted in Rougle, p. 114.

12. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* pp. 17-23.

13. "And I feel 'I' is much too small for me." From "Oblako v shtanakh" (A Cloud in Pants) in *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh,* p. 9.

14. "Christopher Columbus was Christopher Columbus--Spanish Jew (from magazines)." *Stikhi ob Amerike*, p. 31.

15. "Why are you pestering me? Europe this, Europe that... I'll go and discover a new country." Ibid., p. 32.

16. "What kind of nation are you? Zion and nothing more. Any little Portuguese can outshine you." Ibid., p. 31.

17. Notes to *Stikhi ob Amerike*, p. 475.

working on his novel about a journey to, and adventures in America, of Karl, a young Czech-German boy.[18] *Amerika,* as the novel was later titled by Kafka's friend Max Brod who published it after the writer's death, presents technology as a concrete manifestation of the miraculous New World and demonstrates the role technology plays in the desire to locate a miracle and to make oneself at home in it. Herein lies the analogy between Kafka's and Maiakovskii's conceptions of American technology. The main character, upon his arrival in the States, first encounters the new shape of America in the amazing writing-desk with "a hundred compartments of different sizes" that appear and disappear at the turn of a handle. This writing-desk was far superior to its measly imitations which his father had coveted for years back in Prague. For Kafka, who never visited America, just as for Maiakovskii, the country becomes a kind of a mythic space of promise; he envisions its technological gifts in very personal terms: a writer fancies a special desk able to enhance the pleasure of his primary activity. Kafka meticulously describes the workings of the desk's complex apparatus, so that there remains no question that it metonymically stands for the great technological prowess of America:

there was also a regulator at one side and by turning a handle you could produce the most complicated combinations and permutations of the compartments to please yourself and suit your requirements. Thin panels sank slowly and formed the bottom of a new series or the top of existing drawers promoted from below; even after one turn of the handle the disposition of the whole was quite changed and the transformation took place slowly or at delirious speed according to the rate at which you wound the thing around. It was a very modern invention... [19]

The writing-desk, which exemplifies the magic of American technology, reminds the boy of a moving Christmas panorama in the marketplace at home, whose scenes would change at the movement of a handle. Karl remembers himself as a child mesmerized by the panorama but mindful of his mother's insufficient attention to it. He tried hard to catch every minute detail of the panorama in order to point it out to his mother. Thus he attempted to postpone realization of the separation of the two realms, the enchanted world of childhood and prosaic reality, by making the miracle enter reality, by making it matter to his mother. Kafka asserts that although the desk had other purposes than to remind Karl of this scene from his childhood, "in the history of its invention there probably existed some vague connection similar to that in Karl's memory."[20] The writing-desk hence does not simply parallel the Christmas panorama in its ability to enrapture a child, but also because it serves as a site of tension. It recreates the joy in the presence of the miracle and the failure to master it, to make it stay. It is very telling that the contraption is a writing-desk: it is through technology and writing that man attempts to author being and to authorize himself in it. This technological gadget, modeled on a child's toy, uncannily holds all the threads to my understanding of the miracuolous technologically-advanced America of Maiakovskii's poetry: technology's capacity to serve as a mechanism for fulfilling the most deep-seated desires, the pleasure of imagining its dramatic impact, and the realization that the powers it provides are illusive and transitory.

Heidegger reaches into the etymology of the term "technology" to discover that the Greek "*techne* is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts."[21] He asserts that technology is not just a means to an end; it's not by manufacturing, but by revealing the latent potential of the world that man gains mastery over it. For Maiakovskii technology, like poetry, is a way of communicating with the world, of winning it

18. Klaus Mann's preface to *Amerika*, p. vii.

19. *Amerika,* p. 36.

20. Ibid., p. 37.

21. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," p. 13. Heidegger's reassessment of technology arises from the protest against what he sees as the modern utilitarian attitude toward it. He shows that man no longer directs his pursuits at discovering the real, does not attempt to understand reality and his place in it, but instead by believing himself to be the subject of knowledge and the bearer of control, concerns himself with finding ways to apply technology as means toward the end of securing and tightening this control. Unaware of his own subjective existence, man does not see that his mastery and the scientific framework on which it rests is only a construction. Such lack of awareness of his own place leads to man's increasing loss of control over technology which he considers to be his own creation but which in fact is present in Being. Heidegger proposes that man needs to realize that he is in the dominion of Being and sees technology as a way to gain "insight into that which is." Although the futurist Maiakovskii praised himself for being a very modern man and for standing in the vanguard of modernity, his relationship to technology seems to me to find more affinities with that of the ancient Greeks' one which Heidegger presents as a model rather than the fallacious modern one which the philosopher critiques.

over. In the poem "Brooklyn Bridge" Maiakovskii praises the bridge as the manifestation of the magnificence of human vision (in fact, Maiakovskii's own): "Ia gord vot etoi stal'noi milei,/ zhiv'em v nei moi videniia vstali...."[22] Maiakovskii is not concerned with the practical applications of this technological wonder; in his vision the bridge will serve as a document that future generations will use to recreate the past: "Esli pridet okonchanie sveta/--planetu khaos rasdelaet vlosk/, i tol'ko odin ostanetsia etot/ nad pyliu gibeli vzyblennyi most,/ to, kak iz kostochek, ton'she igolok,/ tucheeiut v muzeiakh stoiashchie iashchery,/ tak s etim mostom stoletii geolog/ sumel vossozdat' by dni nastoiashchie."[23] The bridge compels Maiakovskii to travel into the future, as he imagines how a future geologist will decipher the bridge's meaning as if it were a book of the past feats, the poet himself being one of its chapters. Similarly, in "At the Top of My Voice" the poet compares his poetry to an aqueduct built by Roman slaves in its capacity to withstand the destructive forces of time. What excites the poet then is not so much the bridge itself as what it represents as the product of, and the inspiration for, human imagination. As for Maiakovskii technology is a symbol, not a tool, it's not surprising that he chooses to focus his glance on two of the most tangible and ostentatious marks of technological virility: a skyscraper, a mark of the expansion of the human habitat along the vertical vector, and a bridge, a mark of this expansion along the horizontal one.

Lev Vygotskii traces the first signs of imagination in child's play; the distance between a child's wish and its fulfillment results in play, "an imaginary, illusory world in which the unrealizable desires can be realized."[24] Hence, if we assume for a minute that the trip to America provided Maiakovskii with a chance to see his visions come to life, then the realization of his desire would inevitably stymie the workings of his imagination.[25] In effect, the wonders of New York turn the poet into a mute. The theme of muteness, the inability to communicate amidst the din of cars and trains, recurs throughout the American cycle and the travelogue, and the wonders themselves reduce the poetic richness of expression to puerile expletives: "A lampy kak stanut noch' kopat',/ nu ia dolozhu vam plamechko,/ nalevo posmotrish'—mamochka mat'!/ napravo—mat' moia mamochka![26]"

For Maiakovskii, witnessing the material equivalents of his theoretical projections did not produce the desired effect; it only shook further his certainty in the potency of his visions. By giving a concrete form to Maiakovskii's abstract, cosmic visions America congealed them, condensed them, and reduced them. Having heard Maiakovskii read his "Brooklyn Bridge," one American communist reminded him that the bridge was not only a device for reaching the stars but also a site from which the unemployed jumped off into the river. Reprimanded, Maiakovskii immediately included a line to that effect into his otherwise celebratory poem.[27] But the pinch of reality seems trivial in the face of this beauty, and the line about the poor unemployed rather incongruously loses its political pitch as the suicidal movement down is counteracted by the resurrecting movement up that immediately follows it: "Zdes' zhizn' byla odnim--bezzabotnaia,/ drugim--golodnyi protiazhnyi voi./ Otsiuda bezrabotnye v Gudzon kidalis' vniz golovoi./ I dal'she kartina moia bez zagvozdki/ po strunam-kanatam, azh zvezdam k nogam."[28] In Maiakovskii's

22. "I am proud of this steel mile; in it my visions come to life..." *Stikhi ob Amerike*, p. 85.

23. "If the end of the world befall—/ and chaos smash our planet to bits,/ and what remains will be this/ bridge, rearing above the dust of destruction;/ then, as huge ancient lizards are rebuilt/ from bones finer than needles, to tower in museums,/ so, from this bridge, a geologist of the centuries/ will suceed in recreating our contemporary world." Translation by Reavey, pp. 177-79.

24. Vygotskii, *Mind in Society*, p. 93.

25. The sublime, as Maiakovskii comes to realize, is in the play of the imagination: "Ocean is a matter of imagination. When you are at sea, you also don't see the shore, the waves are also bigger that needed for household use, and you also don't know what's underneath you. But it's only imagining that to the right and to the left there is no ground all the way to the pole, that there is an altogether new, second world up ahead, and that Atlantis might be beneath you—it's only this imagining that makes it the Atlantic Ocean." (*Moe otkrytie Ameriki*, p. 265). But how to sustain his imagination in such close proximity? What can save Maiakovskii from the boredom of nothingness that the ocean becomes over the multiple days of the trip? The closeness ruins the illusion, and the ocean's inevitable presence habitualizes his perception of it.

26. "And when those lamps dig into the night, let me tell you, what a fire! you look to the left—gee whiz! look to the right--holy moly!" *Stikhi ob Amerike*, p. 57.

27. The incident is described in Pertsov, pp. 32-33.

28. "For some, life here had no worries;/ for others, it was a prolonged and hungry howl./ From this spot, jobless men/ leapt headlong into the Hudson./ Now my vision moves unobstructed/ along the cable-strings to the very feet of the stars." Translation by

vision the unemployed appear to jump into the river simply to refresh themselves before their swift crawl up the metal cables to the stars. The bridge, however, marks Maiakovskii's transition from enchantment to disillusionment. His American comrade's comment must have touched a nerve, because in the next poem of the cycle, "Camp *Nitgedaige,*"[29] Maiakovskii complains about the discrepancy between imaginary bridges ("Nami cherez propast' priamo k kommunizmu/ perekinut most, dlinnoiu--vo sto let")[30] and their material equivalents ("chto takoe most? Prisposoblenie dlia prostud").[31] Maiakovskii laments the inability to dwell in his spectacular metaphorical constructions; a god-man just does not seem as godly when he worries about catching a cold.

Since Maiakovskii conceives of technological wonders as symbols and not objects, potentials and not finished products, American skyscrapers and bridges make him question the stability of the relationship between signifier and signified. He explores this slippage of meaning in "A Skyscraper in Cut-away View," the facade of which hides the same banality and drudgery as one would find in "ancient burrows and cubbyholes." In the travelogue, describing his visit to one of Ford's plants in Detroit, Maiakovskii shows the discrepancy between the first impressions of harmony and faultless organization of Ford's famed assembly line and the stories of discontented workers. Writing the notes in the mid-twenties when the government-appointed Central Institute of Labor worked on introducing Ford's system into Russian factories as a guarantee of increasing productivity, Maiakovskii complains that Ford's assembly line depletes workers' strength. He ends the litany with the ultimate argument for the assembly line's counterproductivity: "Detroit has the greatest number of divorces. The Ford system makes workers impotent."[32]

Maiakovskii remonstrates that American technology makes an impression of impermanence and flimsiness. Construction sites transport and evade him at the same time; although he cannot take his eyes off them, he distrusts the spectacular ease with which Americans erect their buildings, comparing the drama of construction to the one-thousandth performance of the most interesting, well-rehearsed play. The reproducibility of the miracle somehow cheapens it, turning it into a trick. Maiakovskii mocks the high society for preferring candles to electricity, theater to movies, and records to radio; the mass quality of technological spectacle, its immodesty embarrasses them, he suggests. They take its shock value to be vulgar in its excessiveness, in its lack of moderation: "they are made uneasy by the magician who has summoned spirits but is unable to control them."[33] But Maiakovskii unwittingly shares this distaste when he recoils from the magnificent New York, calling it "a giant accident stumbled upon by children."[34] What he holds against New York then is its contingent nature; its wondrous technology seems like a deus ex machina, a mere plot device that drives the American master narrative of progress but lacks in deeper meaning and artistic truth.

As technology as a sign loses its meaning, so do words themselves. In "Young Miss and Woolworth" Maiakovskii attempts in vain to persuade a young woman in a shop window advertising sharp American knives to join him in his battle against capital. The glass of the skyscraper separates them and mutes the sound, and his pleas reach her as confessions of love. He imagines himself handsome and corpulent in her fantasy. Is it possible that what Maiakovskii sees as the girl's romantic fantasies are just his own fantasies reflected in the window of the skyscraper? The woman symbolically turns her knife against Maiakovskii instead of capitalists, when she exposes the impotence of his words. The poet stands alone and disillusioned outside the skyscraper, speaking to himself.

Traveling to America opened the poet's eyes in more ways than one, making it clear how playful and fantastic his projections of America and of his place in it had actually been. Maiakovskii's recurrent theme of muteness and failure of communication should be

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Reavey, p. 181, slightly revised.

29. A summer camp run by the communist Yiddish-language newspaper *Freiheit,* which together with the Russian-language newspapers *Russkii Golos* and *Novyi Mir* sponsored a larger number of lectures Maiakovskii gave across America (Moser, pp. 243-44).

30. "Across the abyss we erected a bridge straight to communism, spanning a hundred years." *Stikhi ob Amerike,* p. 89.

31. "What is a bridge? A device for catching colds." Ibid.

32. *Moe otkrytie Ameriki,* p. 341.

33. Translation by Hasty and Fusso, p. 179.

34. From the interview in the New York newspaper *The World,* 1925. Quoted in Moser, p. 253.

considered in the context of his lack of knowledge of English. Maiakovskii's language skills do not ensure communication in America, and technology not only falls short of his expectations, but, in fact, hinders his attempts or at least exposes his defeat. In fact, upon his arrival home, Maiakovskii writes an essay "How I Made Her Laugh" relating how at one of the parties in New York, compelled by the unquenchable urge to make conversation, he had to resort to repeating over and over the one phrase that he could say in English, "Give me, please, some tea," varying it in intonation. At last, exasperated by his own inadequacy and by the mocking glances it provoked, he entreated his friend Burliuk to translate the following sentiment: that if those present could understand Russian, "he could nail them with his tongue to the cross of their own suspenders." Burliuk translated, "My eminent friend Vladimir Vladimirovich asks for another cup of tea."[35] In his earlier poetry Maiakovskii persistently fought against tea rituals as the epitome of his imperishable enemy *byt*; America did not help the futurist to win this battle. Such inability to communicate insured his isolation and separation from the overwhelming majority of his intended audience. Maiakovskii, who in the poem "100 %" pronounced himself to be more American than any American, was not understood by the country whose ear he so fervently desired. It is through language that Maiakovskii found his freedom and his purpose and not to be able to use it must have been intolerably decentering and humbling for him.

Roman Jakobson said that at the core of Maiakovskian mythology lies the antinomy of "I" versus "not-I."[36] For Maiakovskii, technology and poetry are two modes of mediation between his I and the world, of subsuming the not-I into I. The impracticability of Maiakovskii's technophilic dreams exposes the ultimate separation between his world of play and reality. When he reaches America, his epic flights of fancy give way to lyrical poems in which the poet attempts to reformulate his relationship to the country on more intimate terms. The separation, which in his pre-trip poetry had been conditioned by the unavoidable epic distance, paradoxically becomes even larger when this distance is seemingly breached. Even in his paean to the Brooklyn Bridge this separation is palpable as the only link between the metaphors Maiakovskii applies to convey his feelings for the bridge: "Kak v tserkov' idet pomeshavshiisia veruiushchii,/ kak v skit udaliaetsia, strog i prost,-- /tak ia v vechernei sereiushchei mereshchi, vkhozhu, smirennyi, na Bruklinskii most./ Kak v gorod slomannyi pret pobeditel'/ na pushkakh--zherlom zhirafu pod rost--/ tak, pianyi slavoi, tak zhit' v appetite,/ vlezaiu, gordyi, na Bruklinskii most./ Kak glupyi khudozhnik v madonnu muzeiia/ vonzaet glaz svoi, vliublen i ostr,/ tak ia, s podnebesia, v zvezdy useian,/ smotriu na Niu-Iork skvoz' Bruklinskii most."[37] He is as far from his ideal as an "insane believer" from what he believes in, as alienated from it as a "conqueror" entering the ruined city, and as unmanned as a "foolish painter" in love with the madonna that belongs to the museum. Revealing the impossibility of transporting the technological wonders of Maiakovskii's imagination into reality without turning them into articles of everyday life, America deflates Maiakovskii himself.

An ethical imperative suddenly emerges in the conclusion of the travelogue, and it is hardly surprising in a genre where man supplants god-man. Maiakovskii begins his travelogue by providing a rationale for his choice of genre. The travelogue is a result of his realization that a reader needs to hear things interesting in themselves instead of fantasies. Thus, he acquiesces to restrain his fantasy in the interest of the common good and produces a travelogue. In the statement that traveling provides almost a substitute for reading, it's the word "almost" that stands out. The result of reading books was the epic poem "150,000,000," which, according to Charles Rougle, portrays America as an inflated composite of the images borrowed from the books of Maiakovskii's predecessors.[38] In the poem he plays the part of a seer of great deeds, his visions encompassing the whole world, his agile eye mastering the universe. By contrast, traveling resulted in the travelogue in which Maiakovskii confesses to his own smallness: "I lived

35. "Kak ia ee rassmeshil," p. 360.

36. Jakobson, *Language in Literature,* p. 278.

37. "As a crazed believer enters a church,/ retreats into a monastery cell, austere and plain;/ so I, in graying evening haze,/ humbly set foot on Brooklyn Bridge./ As a conqueror presses into a city all shattered,/ on cannon with muzzles craning high as a giraffe—/ so, drunk with glory, eager to live,/ I clamber, in pride, upon Brooklyn Bridge./ As a foolish painter plunges his eye,/ sharp and loving, into a museum madonna,/ so I, from the near skies bestrewn with stars,/ gaze at New York through the Brooklyn Bridge." Translation by Reavey, pp. 173-75.

38. Rougle, p. 108.

too little to describe the particulars correctly and in detail; I lived little enough to give a faithful picture of the general."[39] In fact, the travelogue breaks with the prior artistic conventions established by Korolenko and Gorky when it boldly describes the New York skyline not as a view but as its obstruction.[40] Maiakovskii is unable to set his own pace; he is constantly on the move but he is not in control of direction or speed. His moving glance cannot encompass the width or penetrate the depth of America, driving him to desperation: "Rasteriannyi, opuskaesh'sia na skameiku--net nadezh, glaza ne privykli videt' takoe."[41] "Flabbergasted," "stricken dumb," "stunned," and "crazed," Maiakovskii seems like an old man unable to withstand the shocks with which the new reality besieges him. In contrast to the Benjaminian flaneur, Maiakovskii cannot keep up his composure; the desire to identify with the crowd makes him lose himself within it. The lack of distance necessary for reflection precludes his ability to get energy from it; instead it saps the energy out of him.

When Maiakovskii sang the melding of man with machine, he was anthropomorphizing the machine, not automatizing man. Yet, American technology resists his attempt to anthropomorphize it, stubbornly remaining inanimate and unmoved. Its meaningless violence is an affront to the poet: "S-pod koles pronosiashchikhsia elevatorov pliuet pyl', a kazhetsia poezda pereezhaiut vashi ushi. Ne grokhot vospevat'--a stavit' glushiteli--nam, poetam, nado razgovarivat' v vagone."[42] The racket suddenly becomes too loud for the futurist poet, who even "at the top of his voice" is unable to keep up with it. He turns into an old man who cannot stand the pace of modern life.

In her article on utopian visions of the Russian avant-garde, Kristina Pomorska analyzes Maiakovskii's interest in Einstein's theory of relativity; she persuasively argues that Maiakovskii was hopeful the theory would help to immortalize man, and that in his struggle to overcome the everyday routine he was trying through poetry to achieve a total transfiguration into a new form of being. She uses "150,000,000" as an example of this metamorphosis. Pomorska explains it by Maiakovskii's metaphysical dread of mortality and on a smaller scale a parallel dread of aging: "for Maiakovskii the most horrifying property of human existential limits was the inevitable process of aging."[43] Thus, paradoxically, the futurist feared precisely what comes next, the future. The trajectory of Maiakovskii's writings about America can be understood as a process of aging. While Maiakovskii's pre-trip poetry is infused with a child's free spirit in which he animates and rules over his toy world, his travelogue as an attempt at grasping at and finding one's place in the real is a sign of maturation. As a child Maiakovskii towers over his universe; as an old man he stoops his shoulders under its weight.

Thus, Maiakovskii turns against "the futurism of bare technology, a superficial impressionism of smoke and wires" conceived by him and accomplished by America. Instead, the poet urges fellow artists "not to sing the praises of technology but to harness technology in the name of the interests of humankind."[44] Does the humanism emerge as a result of the recognition of his own limitations? Maiakovskii calls for an artistic plan, for a direction without which technology does not produce the future but simply recycles the past. A strange concept of culture appears in Maiakovskii's vocabulary; Rougle argues that when Maiakovskii accuses American technology of a lack of culture, he means the discrepancy between technique and consciousness. Rougle suggests that Maiakovskii begins to believe that Americans' technological know-how "has outstripped their consciousness."[45] That would be an odd concession from a futurist who used

39. *Moe otrkytie Ameriki*, p. 265.

40. Maiakovskii writes: "Thirty years ago V. G. Korolenko looked upon New York and recorded: 'Through the haze on shore there appeared enormous six- and seven-story buildings.' Some fifteen years ago Maxim Gorky visited New York and informed us: 'Through the slanting rain on shore could be seen fifteen- and twenty-story buildings.' So as not to depart from the framework of propriety apparently adopted by these writers, I should have narrated thus: 'Through the slanting smoke could be seen some pretty decent forty- and fifty-story buildings....' But a poet of the future will record after such a trip: 'Through the straight buildings of an incalculable number of stories rising on the New York shore, neither smokes, nor slanting rains, to say nothing of any hazes, could be seen.'" Translation by Hasty and Fusso, pp. 191-92, slightly revised.

41. "Baffled, you plunk down on a bench—it's hopeless, your eyes are not used to seeing such things." *Moe otrkytie Ameriki*, p. 298.

42. "Dust is spat from under the wheels of elevated trains flying past, and it feels as if the trains were running over your ears. The task is not to sing praises of the rumbling but to install mufflers: we poets need to be able to talk on a train." Translation by Hasty and Fusso, p. 207.

43. Pomorska, p. 376.

44. Translation by Hasty and Fusso, p. 343.

45. Rougle, p. 136.

to ascertain that advanced technology would change consciousness. Perhaps, Maiakovskii comes to the realization that the superior technology that he has been dreaming of cannot but reside solely in the mind. Does he defend the necessity of reflection? Does the concept of culture suggest the need to contemplate, to ponder, to continue striving which the finality of American perfections precludes? Maiakovskii claims, for instance, that America's unsurpassed propensity for organization results in "the ignorance of the workers sucked dry by labor, who, after a well-organized workday, don't have left even the strength needed for thought."[46] He ends his travelogue by contrasting the short-lived shock value of the American technical advances to Europe's centuries of deliberation that informed even the pettiest materialistic desires: "even this detestable clinging to the little house, to the bit of land, to their own property—thought over for centuries—now appeared to me as unbelievable culture in comparison to the bivouac structure and the opportunistic character of American life."[47] The writer makes it a matter of choice; between America with all its polished facades and exalted accomplishments and Europe where every inch of land speaks of an "age-long struggle" and where so much remains to be achieved, he finally embraces the latter.

The unbreachable difference between America as a place and America as a symbol results in the permanent displacement of Maiakovskii as a traveling subject who is unable to ever reach his desired destination. Maiakovskii arrives at a dead end in his travelogue, as the future only offers a salvation when it remains a promise. A distance is essential for the experience of the sublime; yet he still longs to breach this distance in order to master the universe. After returning from America, Maiakovskii writes two plays about the future: *The Bedbug*, where the future is no more appealing than the past, and *The Bathhouse* which ends just as the heroes leap into the future aboard a time machine. The reader and the author are left behind with those whom the time machine did not take along.

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46. Translation by Hasty and Fusso, p. 207.

47. Translation by Hasty and Fusso, p. 209, slightly revised.